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Herbert Marcuse's Repudiation of Dialectics: From *Reason and Revolution* to One-Dimensional Thinking

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ABSTRACT: Marxist dialectics continue to be relevant for both the study of society and political practice — a premise based on an analysis of selected works by Herbert Marcuse. In *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, published in 1941, Marcuse draws on Hegelian dialectics to defend Marxism, and he criticizes Marxists who have abandoned the dialectic and, consequently, their revolutionary goals. By the 1960s, however, Marcuse himself had shifted from a Hegelian–Marxist standpoint to a New Left rejection of dialectics and class struggle. Even though his work was immensely popular during the 1960s among intellectuals, students and activists on the left, his anti-dialectical theories weakened the analysis and contestation of capitalism during that time. His theories were also symptomatic of a larger trend among New Left intellectuals to abandon Marxism. This critique of Marcuse's later works suggests that for our contemporary moment dialectical Marxism is more strategically viable than Marcuse's 1960s theories of one-dimensionality and the techno-industrial society.

IN THE PREFACE TO THE 1960 edition of *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, originally published in 1941, Herbert Marcuse looks back two decades to explain that “this book was written in the hope that it would make a small contribution to the revival, not of Hegel, but of a mental faculty which is in danger of being obliterated: the power of negative thinking” (1960, vii).¹

1 The preface to the 1960 edition of *Reason and Revolution*, entitled “A Note on Dialectic,” was not included in earlier or later editions. It was, however, included in Arato and Gebhardt, 1982, 444–51.

He defines “negative thinking” as the “central category of dialectic” (1960, vii). I want to suggest that if Marcuse’s reasons for defending the dialectic were valid 75 years ago during a time of heightened global antagonisms brought about in conjunction with world war and fascism, they are just as valid today in an era marked by the absence of large-scale revolutionary movements, the constant threat of imperialist war, the ever-looming peril of economic crisis, the rampant spread of racist, sexist, anti-immigrant, Islamophobic, and neo-fascist ideologies, the fossil-fuel-driven devastation of the environment, and the arrogant claims of liberals and conservatives alike that Marxism and history itself have come to an end. Dialectical thinking — as the basis of social critique and revolutionary praxis — faces obliteration in a neoliberal capitalist world in crisis.

In the midst of such socioeconomic turmoil, we are entering a historical period in which political activism and resistance could come to match or surpass the political intensity of the 1960s, and the stakes today arguably could be greater than they were back then. Needless to say, there are lessons to be learned from the 1960s. Despite the many gains made by the antiracist, antiwar, antisexist, and anti-establishment movements of that time, those movements did not lead to the transformation of capitalism — largely because of the persistence and strength of capitalism as a system, but also because of the strategic mistakes made by activists and intellectuals on the left. Not only did those movements fail to change capitalism, but the social conditions for the working class and racial minorities worsened in the decades that followed with the rise of neoliberalism and globalization, the deregulation of the corporate economy, the privatization of state services, the dismantling of the industrial base, the destruction of unions, the racist effects of a disastrous “war on drugs,” and the proliferation of the prison-industrial complex, not to mention the recurring economic crises and the various wars in the Middle East, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Africa. It is exceedingly important for activists and intellectuals on the left today to learn the lessons of what worked and did not work during the 1960s, and since, to avoid the costly mistakes of the past and aim for greater success in contesting capitalism in the present and future. One of the key mistakes of the left during the 1960s, in my view, was the abandoning and discrediting of the basic principles of Marxism — especially dialectical materialism — in devising strategies of resistance. Marcuse is a

particularly important scholar to study in this regard because he offers examples of both a rigorous dialectical Marxism in his earlier years and a revised political theory that refutes Marxism in his later years. His turn away from Marxism marks a significant historical moment for Marxist studies because his work was enormously influential among students and activists during the 1960s, and it continues to enjoy a robust following among scholars today.² Among critics who have taken a more decidedly Marxist approach in studying Marcuse, Paul Mattick and Rakesh Bhandari are especially incisive, the latter admitting that Marcuse's "grip on the New Left is difficult for someone of my later generation to comprehend" (Bhandari, 1999–2000, 56), implying that a critical reassessment of Marcuse's work today is especially important for young people. Recognizing Marcuse's dialectical Marxism in his early years and criticizing his unfortunate turn away from dialectical thinking remain timely because the abandonment of dialectics outlined here has carried over into a good deal of the post-Marxism and cultural studies of our own time. Dialectical thinking is essential for anti-capitalist politics because it enables a critical understanding of class struggle and other contradictions of capitalism, such as the falling rate of profit, the crisis of overproduction, and the consequences of these developments.

In this essay, I will compare *Reason and Revolution* to a few of Marcuse's later works to demonstrate the ways in which, in the 1930s, he embraced dialectics and then, in the 1960s, repudiated the classical Marxian form of dialectics in formulating his theories of one-dimensionality, technological totalitarianism, and industrial society. I contend that during the course of his career Marcuse shifts from a Hegelian–Marxist theoretical standpoint to a rejection of dialectics and class struggle. This shift becomes evident in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) and other works from that period. Interestingly, the early Marcuse of *Reason and Revolution* serves as a useful theoretical guide in forming a critique of the later Marcuse. My purpose for undertaking this study is to argue for the continuing relevance of dialectics in critical theory and political practice, and to suggest that Marcuse, as part of a broader New Left movement, played a significant role in attempting to undermine dialectical thinking and in laying the groundwork for

2 Angela Davis, Douglas Kellner, Andrew Feenberg, Robert Pippin, John Abromeit, Heather Love, George Katsiaficas, Stanley Aronowitz, Kevin B. Anderson, and others have written sympathetically about Marcuse in recent years.

culture-based political programs and other non-dialectical systems of thought.

Marcuse as Dialectician

In *Reason and Revolution*, Marcuse demonstrates an inspiring commitment to Marxist dialectics in spite (but also because) of Marx's affinity to Hegel. In this groundbreaking book, Marcuse analyzes the centrality of the dialectic in Hegel's major works from 1800 to 1831.³ In so doing, he demonstrates the ways in which Hegel's dialectic influenced Marx but simultaneously argues that the significance of the former can only be fully appreciated by comprehending Marxism's dialectical sublation of Hegel. In a sense, Marcuse argues, Marx made Hegel's dialectic relevant and coherent from a materialist standpoint by historicizing it. Marcuse also traces the influence of Hegel's work on other 19th- and early 20th-century philosophers and social scientists, and he is especially critical of those, including some Marxists, who repudiated dialectics. "The history of Marxism," he writes, "has confirmed the affinity between Hegel's motives and the critical interest of the materialist dialectic as applied to society. The schools of Marxism that abandoned the revolutionary foundations of the Marxian theory were the same that outspokenly repudiated the Hegelian aspects of the Marxian theory, especially the dialectic" (1960, 398). What is most fascinating in this passage from *Reason and Revolution*, aside from its description of the relation between Hegel and Marx, is that Marcuse's criticism of Marxists who "abandoned" their revolutionary goals by denouncing Hegelian dialectics, ironically, can be directed toward Marcuse himself in his later years.

In making his case for the revival of dialectics in *Reason and Revolution*, Marcuse discusses and analyzes the various categories of dialectics, clarifying, for example, that the category of "appearance and essence" might best be understood by examining the conflict between "existing reality" and its "negation." He explains that for Hegel existing reality refers to the given facts, the empirical, or that which is obvious, while negation refers to existing reality's potential for overcoming itself — or for undergoing a transformation into something new. It is important

3 Fredric Jameson describes Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution* as one of the "two major Marxian studies of Hegel." The other study is Georg Lukács's *The Young Hegel*. Jameson, 1981, 51 and 51, n28.

to note that existing reality cannot be fully or adequately understood in isolation from its negation (or inherent potential) because then it would remain incomplete or one-sided. The truth of an existing reality can only be fully appreciated by restoring the negative, a process that Hegel conceptualizes as “determinate negation” (Hegel, 1991, 147). Marcuse states that for Hegel “given facts that appear to common sense as the positive index of truth are in reality the negation of truth, so that truth can only be established by their destruction” (1960, 27). This is so because, even though “given facts” may appear to be true, they repress that part of their inner form (their potential) that makes them essentially true. To see the appearance of an object — physical or social — is to recognize only existing reality, but to understand the essence of an object is to comprehend the conflict between existing reality and its negation — between the object and its potential for transformation. Given its emphasis on negation and transformation, it is not difficult to understand why the dialectic is considered potentially revolutionary when mobilized for social critique. From a dialectical perspective, the working class represents the negation of capitalism and the potential for transforming capitalism into a new social form.

It would be deceptive to think of appearance as totally false or misleading. It will help rather to think of appearance as that which is “apparent” or easily recognizable. Appearance is “not *mere* seeming” (1960, 109) — it is not an illusion or a façade. It “is the expression of an essence that *exists only as appearing*” (1960, 109). That is, appearance is the undeveloped stage (or moment) of the object’s essence; it is the arrested dialectic. Appearance represents partial truth, insofar as it reveals the outward qualities of an object; but it is also misleading because it does not represent the object’s negation. It fails to convey an understanding of the object as a thing in the process of transformation and presents it instead as a non-changing finished product. Thus, appearance offers a one-sided or static conception of the object. Likewise, the essence of an object cannot be equated exclusively with its negation (or potential for transformation); rather, essence must be equated with the *contradiction* between an existing reality and its negation. Contradiction “is not a distortion of a thing’s true essence, but its very essence itself” (1960, 148). Stated differently, “essence denotes the unity of being, its identity throughout change” (1960, 146). The essence of an object is constituted by its internal contradictions as they develop from one historical moment to the

next. Thus, the essence of an object changes over time because all objects are always in the process of constant change, which is to say that all things are rigorously historical and transformative.

As Marcuse explains, essence is not the same as negation, because negation represents only one side of contradiction — one side of the dialectic. Without a clear understanding of the principle of contradiction, both negation and essence remain inconceivable. Furthermore, the act of coming to know the essence of an object reveals that what appears to be true often turns out to be the very opposite of truth when the negative is taken into account or restored, because the restoration of the negative is the fulfillment of an object's "latent potentialities" and its "progress towards . . . truth" (1960, 123). By the same token, we could argue that *any* dialectical critique must begin by recognizing the gap between existing reality and its negation, between the factual and the potential. "The mark of dialectical thinking," argues the early Marcuse, "is the ability to distinguish the essential from the apparent process of reality and to grasp their relation" (1960, 146). Common sense, or what Hegel sometimes refers to as "mathematical" thinking or cognition, (Hegel, 1977, 24–28) cannot grasp the essence of an object because it perceives objects exclusively in quantitative terms, or as if they are frozen in time at the moment of perception. As the early Marcuse states, "the task of breaking the hold of common sense belongs to . . . dialectical logic" (1960, 123). By contrast, "mathematical" thinking identifies a thing for *what it is*, as opposed to understanding it for *what it is not* but has the potential to become (or is in the process of becoming).

Making use of these and other dialectical categories, Marcuse undertakes a critical study of the emergence of fascism in pre-war Europe. He asserts that Nazism did not emerge as a historical aberration, but as the logical development of bourgeois liberal democracy, and argues further that even though liberalism gives the appearance of expressing a hostility to all forms of totalitarianism, in essence it manifests a tendency to develop into full-blown fascism — a potential that in fact came to fruition while Marcuse was writing *Reason and Revolution*. Additionally, in "The Struggle Against Liberalism in the Totalitarian View of the State," originally published in 1934, Marcuse points out that liberalism discloses this tendency with its utter disdain for Marxism coupled with its unconditional rejection of socialism. He explains, in a refutation of liberal sociologist Ludwig von Mises,

that "liberalism considers 'capitalism the only possible order of social relations,' and [that is] why it has only one enemy: Marxian socialism" (1968, 10). Marcuse's analysis of liberalism's tendency to evolve into fascism was not unlike the official position of the Comintern during the Third Period (1928 to 1934). The Comintern leaders argued that social democratic (or liberal reformist) parties were "social fascists" because they enabled finance capitalism's drive toward fascism. R. Palme Dutt, for example, asserts that both "Social Democracy and Fascism" serve to maintain the rule of monopoly capitalism, but they do so in different ways. "Fascism shatters the class organizations of the workers from without, opposing their whole basis, and putting forward an alternative 'national' ideology. Social Democracy undermines the class organizations of the workers from within" the workers' organizations by taking advantage of workers' antipathy toward capitalism (Dutt, 175). In a comprehensive study of Marcuse's major works, Douglas Kellner explains that Marcuse and other members of the Frankfurt School, during the early years of the Institute for Social Research, "accepted the orthodox Marxian theory that fascism was a product of capitalist society [and] perceived the roots of fascism in . . . capitalist socio-economic crises that were given a totalitarian solution in order to protect the capitalist relations of production and to secure the continued control of the ruling class" (Kellner, 1984, 95–96).

Substantiating Kellner's assertion, Marcuse argues against the claim that Hegelianism leads to fascism, and this was one of his main purposes in writing *Reason and Revolution*. The accusation that Hegelianism inevitably leads to fascism was made during the early part of the century by neo-idealists and liberals who, motivated by their own ideological interests, too easily equated Hegel's Absolute Spirit and political philosophy with totalitarianism and thus argued that fascism was a march toward the realization of Hegel's "sovereign national state" (1960, 389).⁴ As Marcuse explains, "ever since the first World War, when the system of liberalism began to shape into the system of authoritarianism, a widespread opinion has blamed Hegelianism for the ideological preparation of the new system" (1960, 390). Needless to say, this charge against Hegel was equally — perhaps even

4 Marcuse identifies L. B. Hobhouse, T. H. Green, and Bernard Bosanquet, as well as the Italian neo-idealists Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile, among others, as examples of idealist philosophers who misread Hegel. See Marcuse, 1960, 389–401.

primarily — an indictment against Marx and Lenin: the Bolsheviks at that time represented a greater threat to the status quo of capitalism than did an idealist philosopher who had been dead for almost a century. To counter this “widespread opinion,” Marcuse undertakes a study that illuminates the most revolutionary aspects of Hegel — at least of the “young” Hegel, up to *The Science of Logic* (1816) — who, in spite of his idealism, anticipates the logic and historical necessity of materialist dialectics. In a convincing manner, Marcuse interprets Hegel as a historically necessary precursor to Marx and thus practically makes of Hegel a Marxist-before-Marx.⁵ But if Marcuse overemphasizes Hegel’s proto-Marxist qualities in *Reason and Revolution*, he seems to do so consciously and with at least two political objectives in mind: to establish historical materialism as a genuine social theory; and to combat the ideologically-driven assumption that fascism develops out of Hegelianism. He accomplishes the latter by revealing that fascism develops as the logical consequence of the unresolvable political and economic contradictions of capitalism, which can be traced back to the increase in the organic composition of capital, the falling rate of profit, and the subsequent recurring crises of overproduction.⁶

Having relied on the critical capacity of dialectics to reveal the antagonism between Hegelian Marxism and bourgeois liberalism, Marcuse utilizes the same approach to expose the essential differences between Hegel and Marx themselves. On the one hand, he argues, as have others,⁷ that Hegel provided the necessary philosophical structure that enabled Marx to develop a social theory based on the materialist dialectic, proclaiming that given (what amounts to) Hegel’s critique of reification as outlined in the first three sections of the *Phenomenology*; given his “analysis of the labor process” as allegorized in the master–slave dialectic; and given also “the description of the

5 Marx repeatedly acknowledges his indebtedness to Hegel. Referring to Hegel, for example, Marx considers himself “the pupil of that mighty thinker,” and he confesses that, in his work on the theory of value, he “coquetted with the mode of expression peculiar to him” (1976, 103).

6 For a well-documented and compelling study that links the rise of fascism in pre–World War II Germany with the political and economic contradictions of liberal capitalism internationally, see Sohn-Rethel, 1978.

7 In the 1967 “Preface to the New Edition” of Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács updates his analysis of the relation between Hegel and Marx, and he self-critically characterizes his book, 45 years after its original publication in 1922, as “an attempt to out-Hegel Hegel” (xxiii). Interestingly, this characterization might be applicable to Marcuse’s *Reason and Revolution*, as well.

conflict between the particular and the common interest [and] the tension between state and society . . . we are driven almost of necessity to the critical theory that historical materialism developed" (1960, 148). On the other hand, Marcuse does not fail to distinguish Hegel's idealism from Marx's materialism. More importantly, his distinction takes the form of a dialectical transition or sublation (*Aufhebung*) characterized by the negation of philosophy and the emergence of a social theory:

The transition from Hegel to Marx is . . . a transition to an essentially different order of truth, not to be interpreted in terms of philosophy . . . All the philosophical concepts of Marxian theory are social and economic categories, [but] Hegel's social and economic categories are all philosophical concepts. (1960, 258.)

We have emphasized that Marx's dialectical conception of reality was originally motivated by the same datum as Hegel's, namely, by the negative character of reality (1960, 312). . . . We have said that for Marx, as well as for Hegel, the truth lies only in the negative totality. However, the totality in which the Marxian theory moves is other than that of Hegel's philosophy. . . . For Hegel, the totality [is] the totality of reason, a closed ontological system, finally identical with the rational system of history. . . . The totality that the Marxian dialectic gets to is the totality of class society, and the negativity that underlies its contradictions and shapes its every content is the negativity of class relations. (1960, 313–14.)

Marcuse explains that in one sense the Hegelian dialectic represents a historical truth in that it emerges as an expression of the "rational system of history," which is to say that the Hegelian dialectic as philosophy was historically necessitated by an emergent capitalist industrial society. The dialectic represented the consciousness and structure of history undergoing constant change and transformation brought about by the persistent sharpening and resolution of contradictions. In another sense, Hegelianism represents a falsehood in its limited consciousness of "the totality of class society." The dialectic with Hegel was trapped in a world of ideas and concepts rather than being engaged, as it was for Marx, with the material interests of social classes. On the one hand, the idealist dialectic was true because bourgeois society thrived on the dialectical negation of the system that it replaced; on the other hand, it was not true because capitalism

needed to obscure its own negation by repressing the transformative potential of class struggle. To understand Hegel as other than both true and not true is to deny the essence of the Hegelian dialectic as the conflict between a historically grounded idealism and a repressed dialectical materialism. Marx, in other words, did not simply *replace* Hegel, nor did he merely *correct* the faulty aspects of Hegel's thinking; rather, he sharpened Hegelianism's internal negation, theoretically and politically, pushing it toward its own opposite. Following Marx's logic, Marcuse emphasizes the importance of internal contradiction by asserting that capitalism may appear to be a stable system, but it is at once a system in the process of decay, eaten alive from the inside, if you will, by its own internal contradictions and by the potential of a force that it must at all costs repress — namely, a revolutionary, anti-capitalist class consciousness. Clearly then, for the early Marcuse, as for Marx before him, capitalism contains its own negation.

The dialectic, for the early Marcuse, is not an analytical method in the traditional sense; it is not a set of concepts that are used to analyze the object from a position external to the object. The dialectic is based on and emerges from the essence of the object itself, or from the object's internal contradictions. "The dialectical method," Marcuse explains, "conforms to [the] structure that the philosophical object has" (1960, 100). Or in social terms,

capitalist society is a union of contradictions. It gets freedom through exploitation, wealth through impoverishment, advance in production through restriction of consumption. The very structure of capitalism is a dialectical one. (1960, 311–312.)

Even so, the dialectical structure of society is not absolute; it is historical. It will not necessarily operate under the same laws and categories forever but will change when society undergoes a qualitative transformation. The transition from a class society to a classless society, from capitalism to egalitarianism, will alter the fundamental structure of social relations, and thus it will alter the dialectic itself. Once this structural transformation occurs, the kinds of contradictions confronted by society will be radically different. "For this reason, it is not permissible to impose the dialectical structure of pre-history [or class society] upon the future history of mankind" (1960, 317) in a classless society. "The communistic revolution," Marcuse explains, citing

Marx, will not only "[do] away with labor" (1960, 292) but it will also radically transform the very forms of consciousness and existence.

The early Marcuse was committed to dialectical materialism — not as a philosophy, but as a social theory aimed at defeating fascism and bringing about a proletarian revolution to replace capitalism with a post-capitalist society. Unfortunately, Marcuse's work after *Reason and Revolution* does not display an equivalent commitment to Marxism, nor does it maintain a comparable level of dialectical rigor. Somewhat paradoxically, perhaps, we can utilize the same dialectical approach used by the Marcuse of *Reason and Revolution* to formulate a critique of his later work. In so doing, we encounter a Marcuse who ultimately abandons a critical dialectic in favor of a spurious dialectic that ends up postulating non-dialectical ideas and practices.

Marcuse's Repudiation of Dialectics

Thirty years after the publication of *Reason and Revolution*, Marcuse's theoretical and political stance has skewed in the opposite direction. He now argues that current political conditions demand a revision of Marxist dialectics. In a short article entitled "The Concept of Negation in the Dialectic," published in 1971 and originally delivered as a paper in 1966, he explains his rationale behind a proposal to revise dialectics — a thesis he develops more fully in *One-Dimensional Man* and *An Essay on Liberation*.⁸ Marcuse asserts: "The present period seems to be characterized by a stalemate of the dialectic of negativity. We face new forms of late capitalism and thus also the task of developing revised dialectical concepts adequate to these forms" (1971, 130). He draws on this basic premise to characterize class struggle and the concept of contradiction as "worn-out concepts" (1971, 132). Marcuse's move away from what might be considered a Marxism influenced by the Third International was not unlike the decision of Western intellectuals (for example, the Historians Group of the Communist Party of Great Britain) to abandon Marxism and Communism after 1956, prompted in large part by the Soviet Union's invasion of

⁸ In *An Essay on Liberation*, published five years after *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse walks back to some degree his rejection of "negative thinking" and "dialectics" in the earlier work, but he nevertheless still makes comments such as: "Technical progress has reached a stage in which reality no longer need be defined by the debilitating competition for social survival and advancement" (1969, 5). Unfortunately, the "technical progress" of which he speaks has not diminished the levels of exploitation for large sectors of the working class.

Hungary and Nikita Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" denouncing Stalin that year (see Smith, 2016). Many of those Marxists who abandoned traditional Marxism in the 1950s and 1960s gravitated toward "New Left" politics, which in some cases eventually evolved into cultural studies. In other words, Marcuse's trajectory was, for better or worse, depending on one's ideological perspective, symptomatic of a larger historical trend rather than a personal decision to abandon a revolutionary Marxist outlook.

In any case, to understand the significance of Marcuse's proposed revisions, it will help to recall briefly the traditional Marxist understanding of revolutionary social change, as described by Marcuse himself in *Reason and Revolution*. For Marx, the transformation of society from capitalism to socialism results from the clash between capital and labor. Dialectically, the repressed negation (labor) of existing reality (capital) represents the concrete future, even if only as a possibility. When the negation overcomes its condition of repression by destroying existing reality, it takes the form of a new reality — classless egalitarianism. The formation of this new reality requires that a working class that has fought tooth and nail to develop a consciousness of itself as the subject of history must now annihilate itself as a class on the road toward egalitarianism. To do otherwise would be self-contradictory, since logically not even the proletariat can exist in a *classless* society.

The later Marcuse argues, however, that the concept of internal negation is no longer valid in the contemporary period for conceptualizing historical change. He explains that dialectical materialism considers internal contradiction to be the motor force of change, but he asserts that advanced technological society has undergone such drastic changes that it can now only be "negated and superseded externally" (1971, 131). That is, social transformation, according to Marcuse, can no longer occur as the result of class struggle; it can only come about as the result of forces that stand "outside" the conflict between social classes. In opposition to the traditional Marxist conception of social change, Marcuse resorts to philosophical language to proclaim the futility of class struggle as a strategy for changing modern society: "it is always the being-in-itself which ultimately develops and rises to a higher historical level by negation" (1971, 130). Class struggle, in his view, strengthens rather than weakens the "being-in-itself," by which he means capitalist society, or capital as subject. He criticizes both the

Marxian and the Hegelian dialectic for supposedly placing too much emphasis on internal contradiction and on the idea that “revolutionary transformation” will come about through “the development of an essence already existing in itself” (1971, 131), that is, that existing reality (capital) will be overcome by its internal negation (labor).

To support his proposed revision of Marxian dialectics, Marcuse looks to the work of Louis Althusser — an unlikely ally, given that each stood on opposite ends of the humanism–structuralism debate among Marxists during the 1960s and 1970s.⁹ Nevertheless, Marcuse reminds us of the wedge that Althusser drives between Hegel and Marx, emphasizing “Althusser’s efforts to redefine the connections between the Hegelian and the Marxian dialectic” (1971, 130). He draws on Althusser’s argument that Marx’s materialist dialectic differs radically from Hegel’s idealist dialectic, and he points out that “according to Althusser, Marx actually broke with the Hegelian dialectic” (1971, 130), insisting that Marxism not be considered a continuation or logical mutation of Hegelianism, but, on the contrary, that it be understood as a completely different historical phenomenon — that is, as a discontinuity. Although he does not cite his source, Marcuse is obviously referring here to Althusser’s “Contradiction and Overdetermination.”¹⁰

The early Marcuse argued that the relation between Hegel and Marx must be understood dialectically as both continuity and discontinuity — as the historical evolution of the dialectic, on the one hand, and as the rejection of idealism, on the other. But the later Marcuse supports Althusser’s argument that the Marxian dialectic must rid itself of any affiliation whatsoever with Hegel’s dialectic. Referring to Marx’s famous statement that with Hegel the dialectic is

9 The humanism–structuralism debate marked a significant moment in the history of Marxist scholarship, but its full consequences lie beyond the scope of this essay.

10 Althusser’s essay “Contradiction and Overdetermination” first appeared in the French journal *Le Pensée* in 1962. A year later, also in *Le Pensée*, he published “On the Materialist Dialectic” in which he addresses two of the main criticisms levied against him for the claims he had made in “Contradiction and Overdetermination” about the differences between Hegelian and Marxist dialectics, and the meaning of these differences for a materialist conception of history. He identifies the two criticisms as follows: “(1) That I have stressed the *discontinuity* between Marx and Hegel . . . and (2) That by proposing the concept of ‘overdetermined contradiction,’ I have substituted a ‘pluralist’ conception of history for the Marxist ‘monist’ conception” (Althusser, 1969, 163). While Althusser disagrees with these criticisms and refutes them in his essay, he certainly understands the central theoretical and political issues at stake in the Hegel–Marx debates that he inspired. The English translations of both articles were included in Althusser’s collection of essays *For Marx* in 1969.

“standing on its head,” and that “it must be inverted, in order to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell” (Marx, 1976, 103), Althusser writes: “It is inconceivable . . . that the *Hegelian dialectic* could cease to be Hegelian and become Marxist by a simple, miraculous ‘extraction’” (Althusser, 1969, 91, emphasis in original). In making this argument, Althusser attempts to free Marxism from what he considers to be the idealism inherently embedded within the very structure of Hegel’s dialectic, and he contends that it was not possible for Marx simply to invert Hegel or to remove the rational kernel from within the mystical shell of Hegel’s dialectic because the *form* of the dialectic itself is idealist. But with Althusser’s critique of Hegel’s dialectic, the Marxist dialectic suffers as well, while the theory of contradiction is replaced with the structuralism-inspired concept of “overdetermination.” The later Marcuse expresses agreement with Althusser’s argument that unless Marxism repudiates the Hegelian aspects of Marxian theory, it is condemned to idealism — or to philosophy rather than social theory. Marcuse, however, ups the ante. He does not merely agree with Althusser’s argument; he surpasses it, proclaiming that the Marxist dialectic itself is idealist:

I would submit an alternative to Althusser’s thesis: even the materialist dialectic remains under the influence of the positivity of idealistic reason so long as it does not destroy the concept of progress whereby the future is always deeply rooted in the present; so long as the Marxian dialectic does not radicalize the concept of transition to a new historical level, *i.e.*, the reversal, the break with the past and the present, the qualitative difference built into the theory’s tendency for progress. (1971, 130.)

Marcuse’s reference to “progress” here has less to do with formulating a critique of humanity’s march toward a higher level of civilization via a superior form of reason than it does with repudiating the dialectical conviction that “the future is always deeply rooted in the present,” and that all things possess the potential to “progress” from one qualitative state to another — to undergo a radical transformation into something new. Marcuse’s criticism of the concept of “progress” demonstrates the extent to which he has retreated from the dialectical premise that the working through of contradictions elevates the development of a social object to a new level — or, that the politicized struggles of the working class, or some other group of politicized oppressed

people, represent the future negation (and thus transformation) of capitalism. Needless to say, without the concept of a "future" which is "deeply rooted in the present" — or, what amounts to the same thing, a negation within an existing reality — the revolutionary potential of dialectics becomes effectively nil.

Nevertheless, for the later Marcuse, internal negation can no longer bring about change because capitalism has become a highly productive, totally administered society as a result of technological development, culminating in a culture of "abundance." Thus, any possibility that workers will develop revolutionary consciousness has been deadened through higher wages and a more comfortable lifestyle. For Marcuse, working-class struggles and class consciousness have integrated with capital to become part of the repression of the whole. The language of class revolution has become obsolete at best, and totalitarian and oppressive at worst. His criticism is also directed at Marxism, which defeats itself, according to Marcuse, by "belittling" what he refers to as "the power of facts (i.e., the mounting productivity of labor and the rising standard of living)" (1971, 131). Here Marcuse's confidence in factuality does not sound like the Marcuse of *Reason and Revolution*, who points out that the "real field of knowledge is not the given fact about things as they are, but the critical evaluation of them as a prelude to passing beyond their given form" (1960, 145). Additionally, Marcuse's reference to "abundance" and the "rising standard of living" does not apply to all people living in the United States equally. It certainly does not include the unemployed, underemployed, homeless, incarcerated, undocumented and disenfranchised, and it does not apply equally to whites and people of color, men and women, straights and gays. Nor does it take into account the inevitability of recurring economic crises and their effects on the "standard of living" of the working class.¹¹

By contrast, the early Marcuse demonstrates how capitalism throughout most of its history has been fraught with crisis after economic crisis: "Crisis and collapse are not accidents and external disturbances, but manifest the very nature of things and hence provide the basis on which the essence of the existing social system can be understood" (1960, 148). For the early Marcuse, capitalism continues to exist under the same structural logic of perpetual crises and

11 For a concise but sharp description of working-class resistance in the 1960s, see Smith, 2011.

repressed contradictions, even though superficially it may seem to have undergone substantial transformations. But for the later Marcuse, change will not come from dialectical transformation or class struggle; it must come instead from forces “outside” the whole. He identifies two “outside” forces: the “state” and what will come to be known as the New Social Movements. Marcuse supports the intervention of “the state,” but by “state” he has in mind “a power outside the whole interest system.” Only such a power can “advocate the universal in this hopelessly antagonistic society” (1971, 131). Here Marcuse imagines a state that stands disinterestedly outside the conflict between labor and capital. His concept of a disinterested state is a romantic conception, to say the least. More detrimentally, it eradicates the idea of a working-class subject as an agent of historical change. Marcuse argues also for a second “outside” force — a force not centered in a single class. This force represents a “chaotic, anarchistic . . . feeble, unorganized opposition,” but it “nonetheless rests on motives and purposes which stand in irreconcilable contradiction to the existing whole” (1971, 132). Marcuse alludes here to the kind of politics that would come to be associated with the New Left, the New Social Movements, the Free Love Movement that opposed the status quo through sexual liberation, and various kinds of counter-culture groups that followed anarchist strategies of opposition based on “dropping out”: “The refusal to join and play a part, the disgust at all prosperity, the compulsion to protest” (1971, 132). Today, Marcuse’s model of “liberation” may seem a bit dated, but the non-class-based forms of protest that he describes sound strikingly similar to some contemporary postmodernist models of cultural resistance, accentuating our urgent need to rethink what a form of resistance based on dialectical materialism would look like today.

Rather than argue for a critical dialectic that takes into account both internal and external factors, the later Marcuse proposes to turn away from the dialectic — to prioritize existing reality at the expense of its negation. At this point, Marcuse engages in a politics that *refuses to participate* in the social totality, rather than a politics that attempts to *transform* it. Thus, it comes as no surprise that, in the conclusion to *One-Dimensional Man*, he states: “On theoretical as well as empirical grounds, the dialectical concept pronounces its own hopelessness” (1964, 253).

Technology and Capitalism

Marcuse's turn away from the dialectic did not start in 1971 with "The Concept of Negation in the Dialectic" or in 1964 with *One-Dimensional Man*. It can be traced back at least to the 1954 "Supplemental Epilogue" in the second edition of *Reason and Revolution*, appearing a mere 13 years after the book's original publication. In marked contrast to the optimistic arguments about the dialectic in *Reason and Revolution*, the 1954 epilogue begins to discuss some of the arguments that Marcuse acknowledges would be formulated more fully ten years later in *One-Dimensional Man*.¹² He states, for example, that "neither the Hegelian nor the Marxian idea of Reason have come closer to realization; neither the development of the Spirit nor that of the Revolution took the form envisaged by dialectical theory" (1954, 433). Notwithstanding the relatively brief period of time he allows for the realization of dialectical theory, considering the long, trajectory of human history, he argues that the revolution has not happened in large part because the "overflow of productivity" in capitalist society and the "rising standard of living" (1954, 436) for all social classes has stunted the workers' revolutionary zeal. As a result, the working class has become an integrated component of capitalism itself, implying that workers as a class, to some degree, are part of the systemic problem rather than the solution. For Marcuse, workers have become a positive force that helps to solidify the system rather than a negation of the system. Paul Mattick explains:

According to Marcuse a working-class revolution can no longer be expected in industrially-advanced society. And even if it could be expected, control over the productive powers by "control from below" would, in his opinion, not lead to a qualitative social change. (Mattick, 1972, 99–100.)

Confirming Mattick's observation, Marcuse states:

In the advanced industrial countries, since about the turn of the century, the internal contradictions became subject to increasingly efficient

¹² Marcuse omitted the 1954 "Supplemental Epilogue" in subsequent editions of *Reason and Revolution*. In the preface to the 1960 edition, he explains his reason for the omission, stating that the epilogue "treated in a much too condensed form developments which I discuss more fully in my forthcoming book, a study of advanced industrial society" (Marcuse, 1960, xiv). He was, of course, referring to *One-Dimensional Man*.

organization, and the negative force of the proletariat was increasingly whittled down. . . . The larger part of the laboring classes were made into a positive part of the established society. (1954, 436.)

In other words, new technologies not only enabled capitalism to increase its production, but it also satisfied many of the needs and wants of workers and improved their living conditions considerably. These developments thus removed the material basis or motivation for workers to fight back against capitalism, and they effectively stymied the formation of any revolutionary consciousness before it could develop. In this way, “late industrial society . . . succeeded in controlling its own dialectic on the ground of its own productivity” (1954, 439). Consequently, the primary internal contradiction of society ceased to be the struggle between capital and labor and became instead the conflict between a systematically administered society and the alienated individuals living in that society, regardless of class. “The sphere in which individual and group transcendence was possible,” Marcuse claims, “is thus being eliminated — and with it the life element of opposition” (1954, 437).

Marcuse and other members of the Frankfurt School certainly made important contributions to the analysis of contemporary society with their critiques of techno-capitalist rationality and the extreme alienation (and totalitarianism) it produces. The potential drawback in the critique, however, at least in the case of Marcuse, was an argument that came dangerously close to considering technology rather than capitalism itself as the primary determinant of social conditions. Marcuse’s thinking about industrial society was influenced by Martin Heidegger’s philosophy of technology, and this led him to formulate his own conception of technology in philosophico-ontological terms. For Heidegger, technology in a broad sense is not strictly something used by people, either to improve their lives or to make production more efficient; technology has also appropriated people and nature for its own use. That is, people don’t make technology; technology makes people. Technology has transformed everything in the world, not only humans, nature and history, but even God himself. For Heidegger, God has become technologized, and technology has become like a god — a process that culminates in what Heidegger refers to as a “world picture” (see Heidegger, 1993). Marcuse similarly thinks of technology not simply as instruments of production or knowledge

but as a determining social force: technology is not neutral in the way that an inanimate object is neutral in the hands of its user; it has an agency of its own. It determines society and the relations of power. Technology, as a “productive apparatus tends to become totalitarian to the extent to which it determines not only the socially needed occupations, skills, and attitudes, but also individual needs and aspirations” (1964, xv). Technology becomes integrated in the lives of individuals by developing its own political logic in the social world. “Technological rationality has become political rationality” (1964, xvi). Marcuse acknowledges that “one may still insist that the machinery of the technological universe is ‘as such’ indifferent towards political ends.” But, he is quick to counter, “when technics becomes the universal form of material production, it circumscribes an entire culture; it projects a historical totality — a ‘world’” (1964, 154).

Marcuse's conception of technology and the “world” it projects, like Heidegger's “world picture,” differs from the traditional Marxist view of technology. Marx, for example, writes that “the self-valorization of capital by means of the machine is related directly to the number of workers whose conditions of existence have been destroyed by it” (1976, 557). For Marx, capitalists invest in technology to compete more effectively in the market place and to increase their profits, but such investments also result in the displacement of some workers and greater levels of exploitation for others. Technological innovation for capitalism also results in the increase of what Marx referred to as the “organic composition of capital” (1981, 245) or the value of materials, machinery, and technology relative to the value of the labor power required to produce a determined number of commodities. Such an increase conversely causes a decline in the rate of profit that reverberates throughout the entire capitalist system, and this means less profits for individual capitalists. Terrified of being driven out of business by competition, capitalists begin to produce more goods than can be sold profitably, and consequently the markets shrink as an economic crisis ensues. In response, the capitalists lay off workers, cut wages and benefits, or attempt to produce more commodities with fewer workers — that is, they increase the levels of exploitation. “No matter how much the rate of exploitation [is] increased over time, this upward pressure on the organic composition of capital,” prompted by the need to invest constantly in technology and science, “reduce[s] the average rate of profit in the system as a whole”

(Bhandari, 1999–2000, 63). Under capitalism, technology and science are primarily instruments for class domination, despite the many cases where some new technologies have actually produced positive effects for human existence. “It would be possible,” Marx stipulates, “to write a whole history of the inventions made since 1830 for the sole purpose of providing capital with weapons against working-class revolt” (1976, 563). Similarly, in his *Critique of Marcuse*, Mattick draws on a traditional Marxist viewpoint to argue that it is the capitalist drive for profit, not technology, that determines the specific social relations under capitalism — and, by extension, the specific forms of alienation that individuals experience under capitalism. He writes:

It should be clear that the dynamics of capital production are not identical with technological development. It is not production and productivity as such which propel capitalism, but the production of profits as the accumulation of capital. (Mattick, 1972, 14.)

Beginning with the 1954 epilogue, Marcuse refers to society as “industrial civilization” or “industrial society” rather than capitalism because for him the internal contradictions that distinguish these formations have drastically changed. Under capitalism, the main contradiction takes the form of a struggle between social classes. Within industrial society, the main contradiction becomes the conflict between “man” and technological society. Thus, Marcuse argues not for class liberation, as he did in *Reason and Revolution*, but for the existential freedom of the alienated individual — that is, freedom from the technological totalitarianism of any social system, whether capitalist or socialist. The emergence of industrial society “made the classical forms of the social struggle old-fashioned and romantic. The barricade lost its revolutionary value just as the strike lost its revolutionary content” (1954, 438). In one clean sweep, Marcuse has disavowed the significance of the working class as a historical subject of change and reclassified contemporary society from “capitalism” to “industrial society.”

Marcuse’s revision of the dialectic continues in *One-Dimensional Man*, in which he asserts that in “advanced industrial society . . . the integration of the formerly negative and transcending social forces,” *i.e.*, the working classes, “with the established system seems to create a new social structure” (1964, 145). That social structure is a

one-dimensional industrial society--one-dimensional because it is now free of internal contradiction or class struggle. The increased efficiency and productivity of late industrial society resulting from technological progress has allowed for "the happy marriage of the positive and the negative" (1964, 227), by which he means the unity of capital and labor. Even though Marcuse refers to one-dimensional society as repressive, manipulative and totalitarian — characterizations that a large number of students and New Left radicals found appealing during the rebellious 1960s — the kind of oppression he theorizes at times seems more psychological and erotic than socioeconomic or historical. Marcuse's assessment of capitalism as both totalitarian and liberating is grounded on the premise that class struggle has come to a standstill. "The closed operational universe of advanced industrial civilization," he argues, "with its terrifying harmony of freedom and oppression . . . lead[s] to the triumph of the one-dimensional reality over all contradiction" (1964, 124). Marcuse does not assert that the dialectic itself no longer exists; he claims instead that it exists only as a conceptual alternative that, in practice, is socially irrelevant because it has no subject. There is no class that can make use of the dialectic successfully. "Dialectical theory is not refuted," he argues, "but it cannot offer the remedy" (1964, 253) because there is no contemporary practice (no class struggle) to which it corresponds. By now, it should be evident that the later Marcuse became the kind of "Marxist" he had criticized in *Reason and Revolution*, namely, Marxists who had "outspokenly repudiated the Hegelian aspects of the Marxian theory, especially the dialectic" (1960, 398).

The Relations and the Forces of Production

It is instructive at this point to compare Marcuse's rejection of the dialectic in his 1954 Supplementary Epilogue and *One-Dimensional Man* to Theodor Adorno's arguments in an article entitled "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?" The latter was originally delivered as the opening talk at the Sixteenth German Sociological Congress in 1968, a year before Adorno's death. The talk was first published as an essay in the academic journal *Diogenes*, also in 1968, but was entitled "Is Marx Obsolete?" Even though Adorno does not refer to Marcuse by name, the article can be read as a general response to non-dialectical (and by implication, anti-Marxist) claims about industrial society.

Despite Adorno's sharp Marxist critique in this article, it bears recalling that "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?" marks a radical departure from much of Adorno's earlier work, which conveys a clear and distinct pessimism, equal to that of Marcuse, about the possibilities of overcoming mid-20th-century capitalism. Nevertheless, the essay offers a provocative set of ideas for challenging the skepticism in Marcuse's work and perhaps in that of Adorno himself.

Adorno describes the purpose of his essay as follows: "What is at stake is whether the capitalist system still predominates . . . or whether the development of industry has rendered the concept of capitalism obsolete. . . . In other words . . . whether it is true that Marx is out of date" (Adorno, 2003, 111). As is the case in all of his work, Adorno does not offer a simplistic straightforward answer to a question but seeks a dialectical resolution to the problem. For example, in contrast to the later Marcuse's assertion that "before the power of the given facts, the power of negative thinking stands condemned" (1960, xiv), Adorno argues for a mediation between the immediacy of facts and the universal laws of society, between empirical research and critical theory, and he cautions against the "fetishism" of either aspect. Dialectical theory, in his view, must criticize "the illusion that individual and concrete facts determine the course of the world," and simultaneously it must "not make itself at home in the medium of the universal" (113). Universal laws must be theorized as manifesting themselves in facts and must change accordingly when the facts change. Similarly, the factual must be understood in terms of the general laws of society; for Marxism, these include "the law of value, the law of accumulation, and the law of collapse [of capitalism]" (112, brackets in original).

Adorno also responds to the claim that because workers lack revolutionary consciousness the working class can no longer be considered a subject of historical change, explaining that working-class consciousness does not determine social class, but, quite the opposite, the conditions of a social class create the potential for class consciousness. His point echoes Marx's declaration that "one cannot judge . . . a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production" (Marx, 1970, 21). Acknowledging that revolutionary consciousness does not exist to any significant degree among the working classes of contemporary

advanced capitalist societies, Adorno argues that one cannot draw on this absence of consciousness to conclude that social classes do not exist. "Class [is] defined by the relation of its members to the means of production, not by their consciousness" (Adorno, 114). The failure on the part of workers to achieve revolutionary class consciousness is the logical outcome of capitalist accumulation and commodity fetishism. "The impotence of the individual in the face of the totality is the drastic expression of the power of the exchange relation" (Adorno, 120). From this perspective, the absence of revolutionary consciousness among workers does not support the claim that capitalism no longer exists, or that workers and capitalists are now unified aspects of a non-contradictory social whole, but, on the contrary, it serves as further evidence that capitalism and its corresponding division of classes is more firmly entrenched in society than ever before, despite claims that technology, increased productivity, and large-scale planning have somehow rescued capitalism from itself. Even the early Marcuse himself argues that "the possibility of rational planning under capitalism does not . . . impair the validity of the fundamental laws that Marx discovered," but, to the contrary, "the system is destined to perish by virtue of these laws" (1960, 318–319), if and when, we might add, workers and others take deliberate critically conscious actions to bring the system to an end.

Adorno's primary dialectical intervention, however, in "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?" is his critique of the categories "forces production" and "relations of production."¹³ Adorno discusses these categories in order to theorize, as implied in the title of his essay, the difference between "industrial society" and "late capitalism" and as a way of understanding the present structure of society. He states firmly that the difference is not a problem of nomenclature, but a fundamental opposition between categories of analysis — an opposition that raises the political stakes significantly for scholarship and

13 Not all scholars and activists have agreed on how to interpret Marx when considering the question of primacy in discussing the forces versus the relations of production. For an example of a "forces of production" primacy argument, see Cohen, 2000, who argues for "the productive forces over the production relations" and states that "*the nature of a set of production relations is explained by the level of development of the productive forces embraced by it (to a far greater extent than vice versa)*" (134, emphasis in original). For an example of a "relations of production" primacy argument, see Althusser and Goshgarian, 2013. Althusser argues that "within the specific unity of the Productive Forces and Relations of Production constituting a Mode of Production, the Relations of Production play the determining role, on the basis of, and within the objective limits set by, the existing Productive Forces" (1–2).

activism alike. True to his dialectical commitments, however, Adorno warns that the “dialectician” should not

be forced into a clear-cut distinction between late capitalism and industrial society. . . . The task is to realize that the relation between these approaches expresses the contradiction that characterizes the present situation. (Adorno, 2003, 114.)

Strictly speaking, we have as much to learn from the conflict between the two approaches as we do from either of them in isolation because it represents the inner form of society. “In terms of critical, dialectical theory,” and from a general perspective, Adorno argues, “contemporary society undoubtedly is an industrial society [in] its *forces* of production. . . . However, society is capitalist in its *relations* of production” (Adorno, 117). Or, another way of saying the same thing: contemporary society is marked by a contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production — between technology and class struggle. However, from a dialectical perspective, and from his contemporaneous historical moment, one aspect of the contradiction is primary, and that aspect, in Adorno’s view, resides in the relations of production.

The signature of the age is the predominance of the relations of production over the forces of production. . . . The fact that the extended arm of mankind can reach distant, empty planets but is incapable of establishing a permanent peace on earth makes visible the absurd goal toward which the social dialectic is moving. (Adorno, 2003, 119.)

The relations of production are marked by the fact that class power is firmly in the grasp of capital, which is propelling civilization toward catastrophe. Contrary to Marcuse’s claims, it is not the forces of production — not technology — driving society toward absurdity, permanent war, and the seemingly never-ending colonization of the globe; it is the class relations and capital’s “concern for profit and domination” that have created this situation. “We should not blame technology, that is to say, the forces of production. . . . It is not technology that is the catastrophe but its imbrication with the social relations that embrace it” (*ibid.*, 118). Unfortunately, “the idea that . . . the notion of society can be easily constructed solely by reference to the forces of production, is the current shape of socially necessary illusion” (124), which is to say that capital controls not only the forces of production but also, through various

social apparatuses, the production of ideologies that become “a real force” (120) and a social necessity that prevents people from being able to imagine an alternative world and a strategy for achieving that world. Despite Adorno’s general skepticism toward class struggle in most of his work, his adamant insistence on Marxist categories for the interpretation of society — along with his view that ideology possesses the potential to become its opposite, *i.e.*, a “free spirit, which wishe[s] to do away with repression once and for all” (120) — appears (here in one of his final published works) more critically sustainable than Marcuse’s revisionist repudiation of the dialectic.

Conclusion

In *Search for a Method*, Jean-Paul Sartre addresses the general disconnect between bourgeois philosophy and material reality in declaring that the “condemnation of dialectic is aimed no longer at Hegel, but at Marx. It is no longer the refusal of *Knowledge*, but the refusal of *praxis*” (1968, 16). Similarly, almost three decades later, Jaime Concha asserts in the foreword to Neil Larsen’s *Modernism and Hegemony: A Materialist Critique of Aesthetic Agencies* that “now, as on other occasions, the struggle against Hegel is the oblique disqualification of Marx and of the historico-practical fruits of Marx’s influence on the planet” (Larsen, 1990, xviii). Sartre and Concha, like others before and since, emphasize the continuing relevance of dialectics for scholarship and activism committed to challenging capitalism and helping to bring it to an end. They are also critical of intellectuals on the left who have revised Marxism beyond any critical usefulness or have abandoned it entirely. Marcuse’s repudiation of the dialectic during the 1960s resulted in an unfortunate distancing of his work from Marxism and the forms of praxis it is capable of generating. For those of us interested in the possibilities of revolutionary praxis and social transformation in our current historical moment, there is much to learn from Marcuse’s shift away from dialectics. This shift represents more than simply a theoretical project gone awry — more than a story of an intellectual who renounced a set of beliefs he previously held; the shift, rather, is a manifestation of capitalism’s material need to negate the theoretical as well as the political implications of the dialectic, which in materialist terms means the negation of class struggle and class consciousness. I refer to Marcuse’s anti-dialectical theories of one-dimensionality and industrial society as “a material need” because

ideas do not operate exclusively as empty signifiers floating harmlessly in space but help to create the material conditions necessary for a social system to continue to reproduce itself (or to hinder that reproduction) with the least amount of static. Marcuse's early work in *Reason and Revolution* was enormously inspirational in its revival of the dialectic, only to be replaced by Marcuse's negation of dialectics years later. Ironical as this may seem, the later work now expresses itself as the historical necessity to be reversed, or, as Marx himself might say, to be inverted — to be stood on its feet. The later Marcuse argues that in "a world in which the increasing comforts of life and the ubiquitous power of the productive apparatus" predominate, workers and other "forces of negation are either defeated or reconciled with the established system" (1960, xiv). But the truth of positivities such as technology, power, and capitalism can only be grasped when conceptualized in relation to the possibility of their negation. This essay has aimed to contribute in a small way to the revival of a critical theory and practice that Marcuse himself vigorously and persuasively advocated in his early years but later attempted to obliterate: the power of dialectical thinking.

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